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An Exploratory Analysis of the Situational Contexts That Influence On-Duty Police Fatal Shootings

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An Exploratory Analysis of the Situational Contexts That Influence On-Duty Police Fatal Shootings

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ABSTRACT

Examining the diverse scenarios and situations underlying fatal shootings by on-duty officers charged with murder and manslaughter is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies and policy recommendations. Previous studies focus on victim characteristics but often overlook motivations and situational contexts. To address this gap, this study uses data from the Henry A. Wallace Police Crime Database to examine situational contexts of on-duty fatal shootings. Specifically, we explore how the nature of the encounter, environment, weapons and bodycam presence, and officers' perceptions influence these events. By analyzing these factors, we aim to understand the underlying causes of fatal shootings.

METHOD

The data for this project were collected as part of a larger research project on police crime. The data were compiled from multiple news sources and court documents from the years 2005-2024. The news sources used for this project were primarily discovered through Google News™ search engine and Google Alerts™ email update service. For this project, we narrowed the data from all nonfederal sworn law enforcement officers charged with any crime to solely sworn law enforcement officers who were charged with manslaughter, murder, or homicide as a result of an on-duty fatal police shooting. Data on reported violent crimes by department were used from the Crime Data Explorer from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Table 1. Demographics of Officers who commit On-Duty Fatal Shootings from 2005-2024 (N= 199)

n (%)		n (%)	
Count of Department Violent Crimes Reported		Call Type	
0-99	45 (22.6)	Active Shooter	9 (4.5)
100-499	19 (9.5)	Violent Individual	7 (3.5)
500-999	12 (6.0)	Robbery	8 (4.0)
1,000-4,999	42 (21.1)	Officer Assistance	7 (3.5)
5,000-9,999	19 (9.5)	Citizen Assistance	8 (4.0)
10,000+	14 (7.9)	Domestic Violence	8 (4.0)
Unknown	48 (24.1)	Violation of Protection Order	3 (1.5)
Victim Behavior		Wellness Check	15 (7.5)
Violent	86 (43.2)	Suspicious Person	16 (8.0)
Non-Violent	48 (24.1)	Theft	17 (8.5)
Suspicious	65 (32.7)	Public Disturbance	6 (3.0)
Conviction Outcome		No call	88 (44.2)
Convicted	62 (31.2)	Other	7 (3.5)
Not Convicted	90 (45.2)	Number of Officers Present	
Pending	47 (23.6)	0	53 (31.7)
Victim Weapons		1	37 (18.6)
Victim Weapon Presence	38 (19.1)	2	18 (9.0)
Victim Gun Presence	35 (17.6)	3	4 (2.0)
No Weapon	126 (63.3)	4+	76 (38.2)
Bodycam/Dashcam Video		Unknown	11 (5.5)
Bodycam/Dashcam Video	87 (43.7)		
Alternative Video	20 (10.1)		
No Video	92 (46.2)		

Figure 1. Number of Officers Present During the Shooting

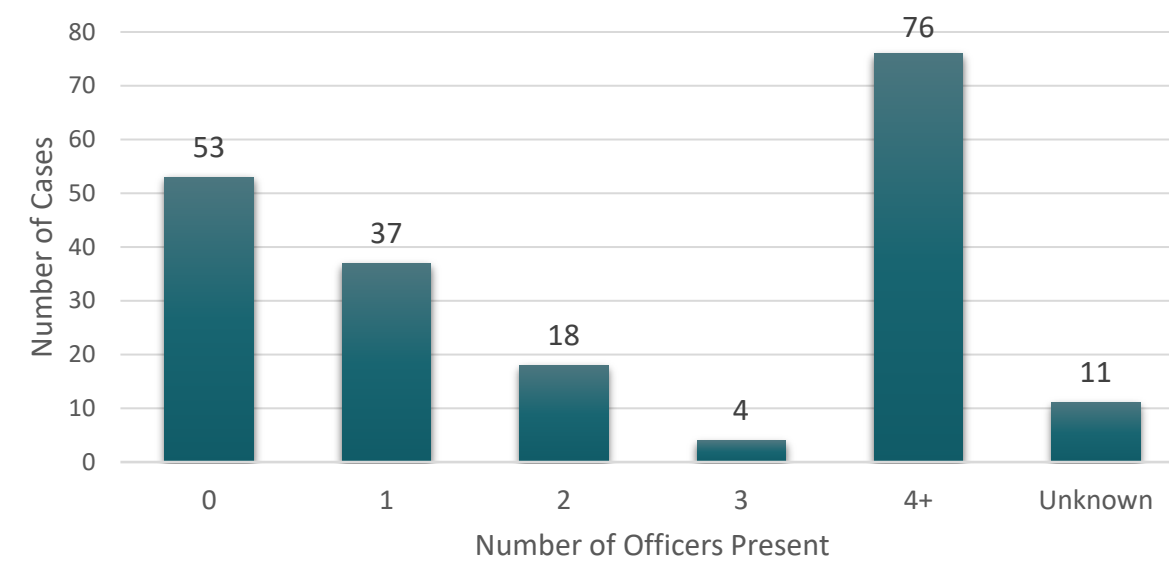


Figure 2. Call Type

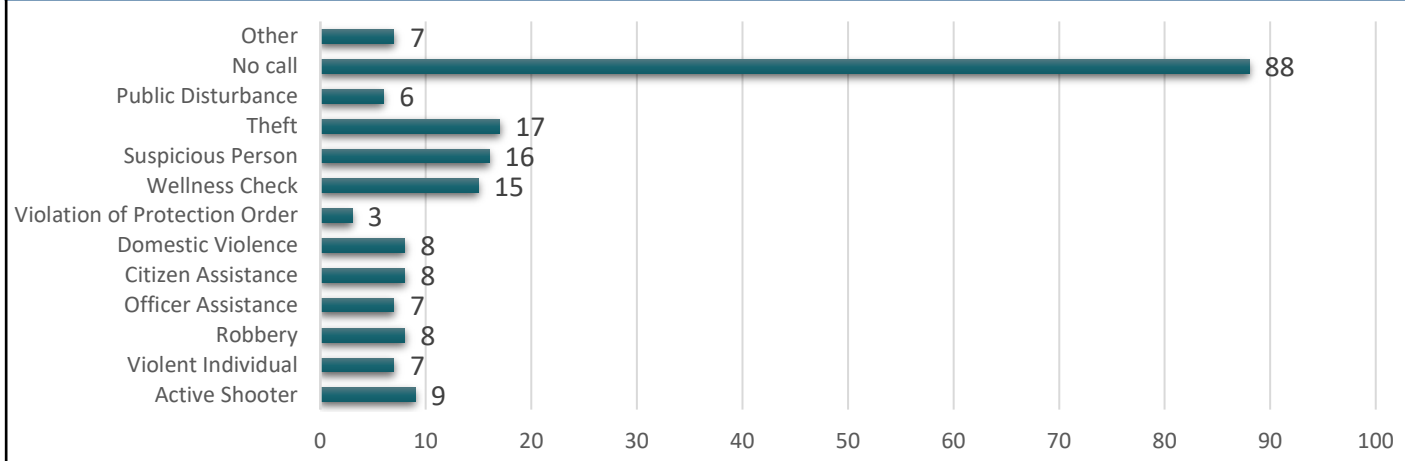
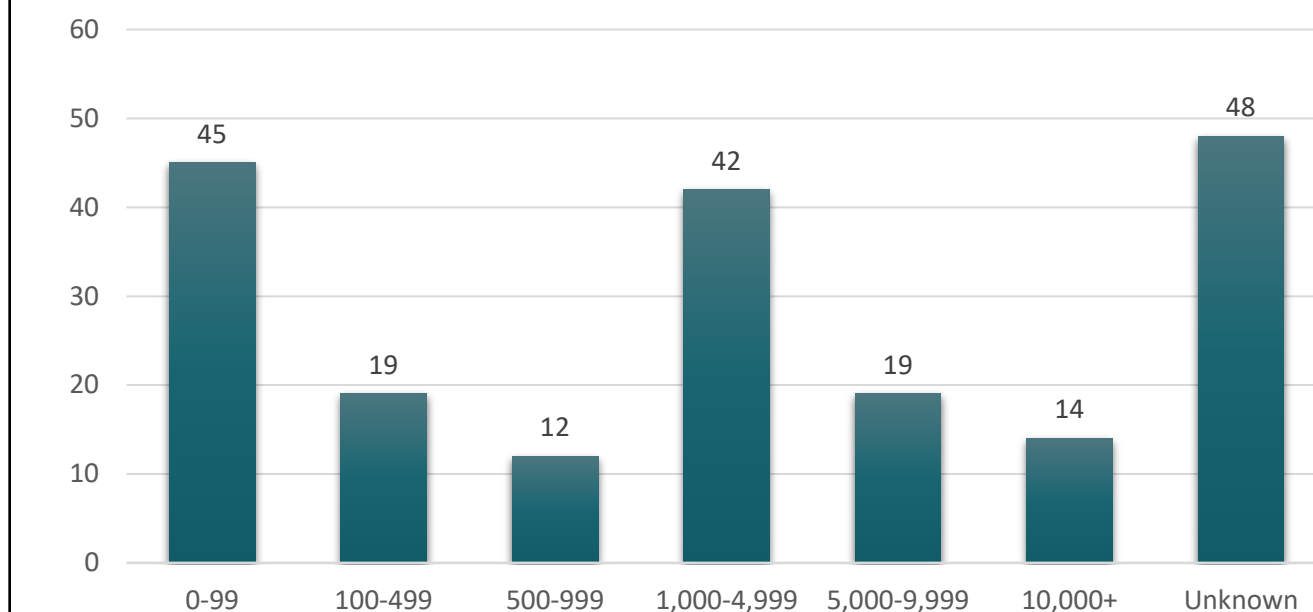


Figure 3. Violent Crimes Reported by Police Departments with an Officer Involved in an On Duty Fatal Shooting



Figures 4. Video Presence and Weapon Presence with Conviction Outcome

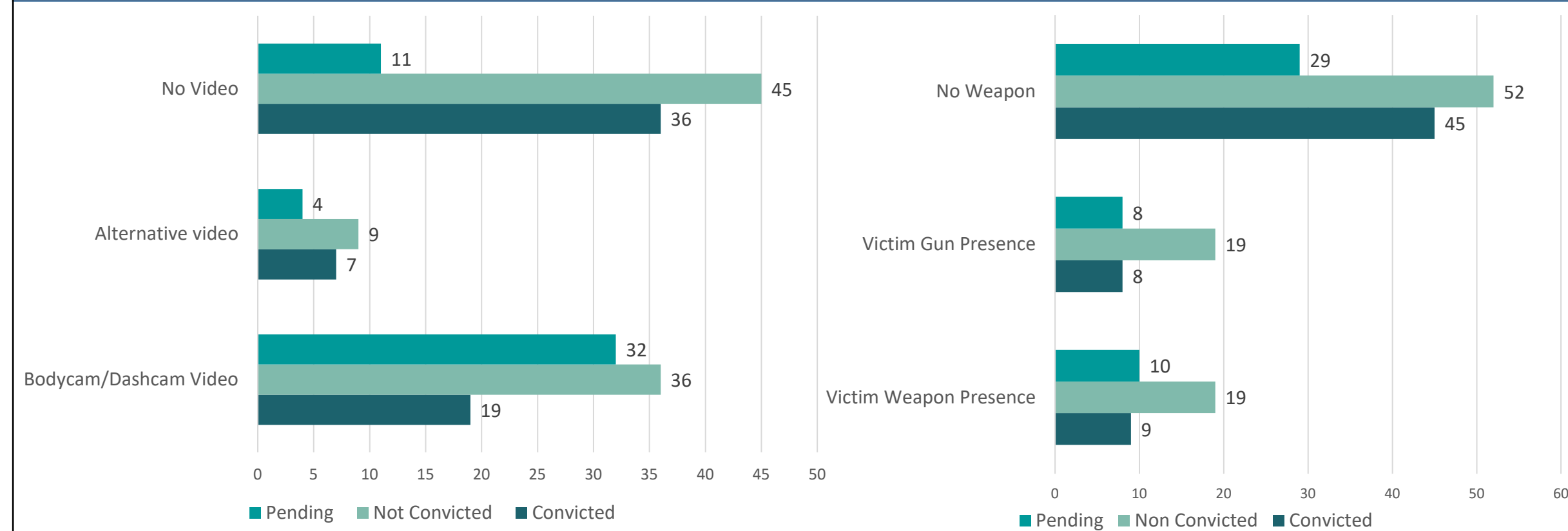


Figure 4a. Video Presence

Figure 4b. Weapon Presence

Figure 5. Victim Behavior

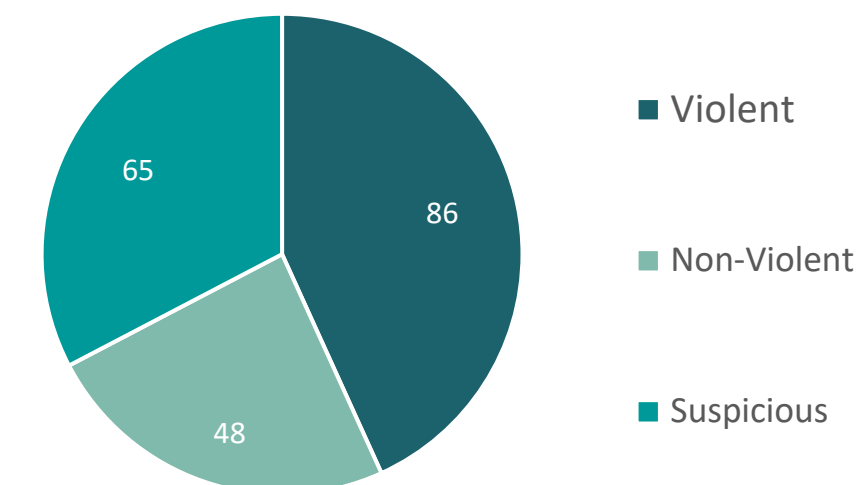
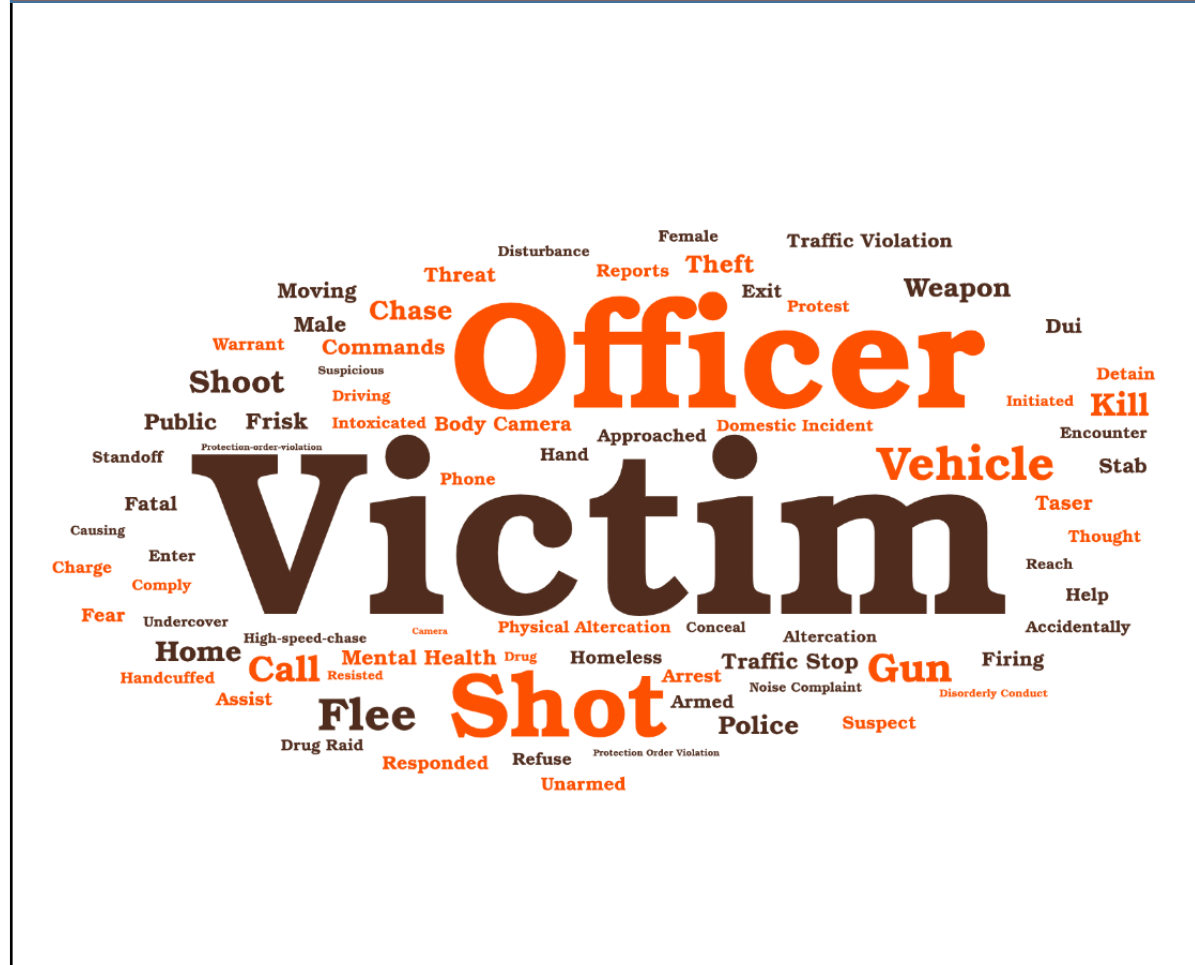


Figure 6. Word Cloud



DISCUSSION

- **Officer Presence and Shooting Patterns**

- Fatal shootings occurred more often when four or more officers were present at the scene. This could suggest that more severe situations tend to involve multiple officers, or that group dynamics may influence decision-making.

- **Presence of a Weapon and Conviction**

- Officers were more likely to be convicted when the victim is unarmed, as seen in cases where no weapon was present. This highlights the role of perceived threat in legal outcomes.

- **Video Evidence and Conviction**

- Officers are more likely to be convicted if there is no video evidence present during the shooting. This counterintuitive result suggests that video evidence may often support the officer's defense, while a lack of video can leave room for doubt about the officer's actions.